

In That Golden Hour

Marco Huysmans

法官狄

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During my visit to Shanghai last month, Shiye gave me some photocopies of documents in the Mugar library. Almost all of them were in Dutch. In fact, that was the reason she gave them to me because she had asked me to translate them in English.

I'm afraid they proved irrelevant to her scientific interests, but some were quite interesting to me. There was one single page in particular that caught my eye. It was the only page containing text in English and its contents took me by surprise.

Poetry

During his years as a student, Robert van Gulik had tried his hand at poetry. Some of his Dutch poems were published in *Elsevier's Illustrated Monthly*. In the biography *Een man van drie levens*, Barkman writes (my translation):

The young Van Gulik had a good style, even though it sounded it bit namby-pamby at times, but the following quote from his article *The wise man of the Willows (China, volume 8, no. 1, 1933)* shows that at that time he, like his friend Slauerhoff [a famous Dutch poet], occasionally came across the Chinese lute, to which he would dedicate so much attention later:

'In memory there was no more than the strange melodious sound of euphonious Chinese verses; there was a song of a lute, there was a garden full of roses and chrysanthemums, there was wine and some melancholy. No more.'

Slauerhoff liked the lute, but he couldn't abide so much sweetness. One time, when they had been playing chess together, they showed each other some of their own verses. 'Not bad,' said 'Slau', 'but please, no more roses and silk, and all that melodious and perfumed stuff. Reality, and even the dream, is more harsh.'

So the lute stayed, but Van Gulik eventually gave up poetry, but for an occasional exception, because he saw, as he himself put it, how

wonderful and how perfect Chinese poetry could be, and realised that he would never be able to reach that level.

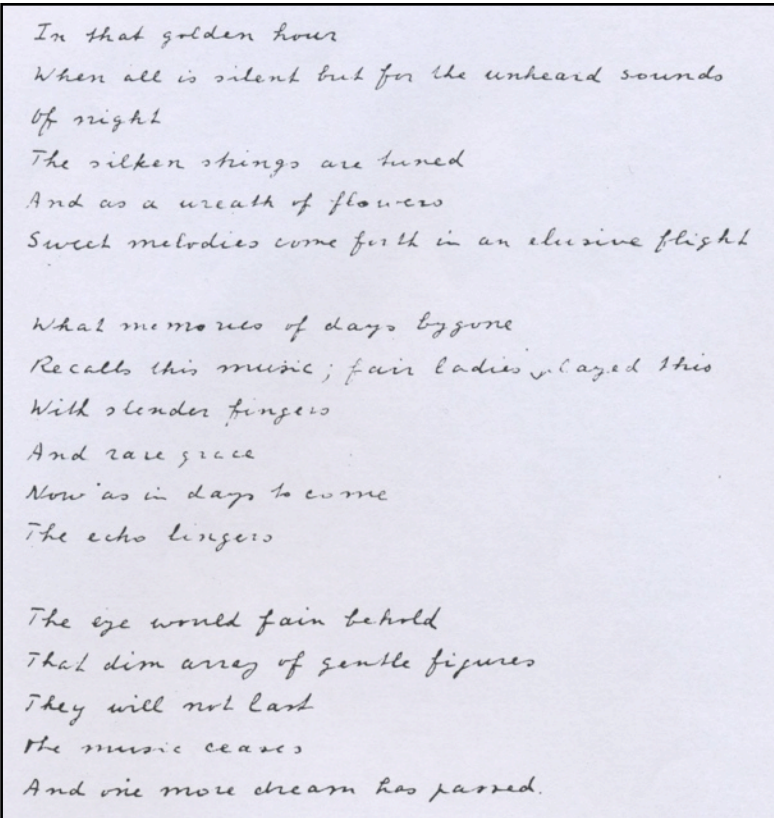
The page that surprised me was just such an 'occasional exception'! It contains a poem in English about the lute: the 'silken strings' are a dead giveaway. So without more ado, let's go to the poem in question which we shall refer to by its initial line for lack of a proper title.

In That Golden Hour

In that golden hour
When all is silent but for the unheard sounds
Of night
The silken strings are tuned
And as a wreath of flowers
Sweet melodies come forth in an elusive flight

What memories of days bygone
Recalls this music; fair ladies played this
With slender fingers
And rare grace
Now as in days to come
The echo lingers

The eye would fain behold
That dim array of gentle figures
They will not last
The music ceases
And one more dream has passed.



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